

BACKGROUND 04: AN ANALYSIS OF PARTY POLICIES AS THEY AFFECT CHILDREN

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Parents and responsible citizens will want to be sure that the party they support has policies which are in the best interests of the child. There is an extra responsibility in that children, who are our future, are without a direct voice in the voting process, and are probably the most vulnerable to neglect and abuse. Child Poverty Action asked one of its members, Dr. Dorothy Howie, to prepare an analysis of the policies of the parties. Her analysis which follows draws on the principles spelled out within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which New Zealand is a signatory.

Only Alliance and United New Zealand have separate manifestos specifically addressing policies for children. The Alliance "Policy on Children and Young People" is detailed and carefully reflects the rights spelled out in the Convention, including the principle that "children in New Zealand have priority" and "the best interests of children will be the first priority of all action" reflecting the key article 2 of the Convention, that the best interests of children be a primary consideration. United New Zealand, as well as having its unique document, "Caring for Kids", has a promise to facilitate Youth Forums in the regions, thus addressing the Convention's article 12 which calls for the right of the child to expression of views when of appropriate age and on matters concerning the child. No other parties specifically address these two articles of the Convention.

The U.N. Convention places clear responsibility on the state to "render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians of the child" (article 18) and to "ensure standards of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development" (article 27). Principles regarding such partnership and shared responsibility with parents are reflected in Alliance's endorsement of support to "ensure that all families have incomes to ensure basic rights", with a range of strategies to enable this, including social welfare benefits increased to above the pre 1991 level, adjusted for inflation, in Labour promising to increase family support rates for all families, and scrapping market rents for housing; in United New Zealand requiring that housing is accessible to all families; and in New Zealand First promising to ensure that an ethic of public service is returned to the state's housing service.

The parties which contrast strongly in economic policies to those parties outlined above focus on families having to fit the policy framework, regardless of need. For example, National emphasises the support to only working families in its Family Tax Credit and tax cuts for all people in full time work; and the Christian Coalition wishes to "protect the institution of the New Zealand family from threats posed by the United Nations treaties and policies" and suggests strategies including monitoring by a new "Ministry of Family Affairs" to "ensure that certain tax benefits and other legal privileges offered by the state are weighted in favour of married couples".

The U.N. Convention's principles concerning health and education include in article 24 the "highest attainable standards of health" and an emphasis on "development of primary health care," and in article 28 "primary education free to all" and "higher education accessible to all". Again, the political parties contrast in two main groupings in relation to these principles. Alliance promises "free health care available to all New Zealanders"; Labour promises that it will give "all children under 5 free access to primary health care services" and a universal subsidy for doctors visits and prescriptions for children; NZ First promises to "remove the profit focus from the current health system", make "visits to the doctor free for every child under 12" and

remove prescription charges for such children; and United NZ states that it will “support the public hospital model”, and establish health clinics in schools. In contrast, National, although promising to invest an extra 1.3 billion in health, clearly advocates the present move towards a market model for health provision, for example in promising “a number of programmes purchased by the RHA’s to keep children well”. Act takes that model even further in stating that everyone will be able to choose to opt into a health insurance scheme i.e. “the money the government would spend on you will go to the insurance scheme of your choice”, and immunisation provided by health companies. Christian Coalition’s position on health is unclear.

A similar contrast exists in education policy. Alliance advocates that all education, including tertiary, be fully government funded and free to all; Labour provides in the early education sector home based universal support and doubles equity funding for schools in poorer areas; NZ First is to prioritise the first eight years for additional resources, along with the establishment of new regional education committees; and United NZ, although “supporting an open market economy”, promises to provide every child over 3 with access to 15 hours of preschool per week and a guaranteed right of access to neighbourhood schools. This latter choice of local school attendance is recognised by Christian Coalition for children with special needs (so that family members can attend school together), but the Coalition’s education policy extends the National Party market model even further with the encouragement of private education initiatives and investigation of a voucher system. ACT advocates “money following the pupil”, which appears to be a form of the voucher system, with parents and students viewed as consumers within a market model.

All parties support the UN Convention on the rights of children with disabilities having “effective access to receive education, training and health care” (article 23), with this right overriding differences in underlying party philosophy. In contrast, the recognition of the need for early parenting support to some extent mirrors these party differences, with Labour supporting a universal home visiting service for all families, Alliance advocating a range of opportunities, United NZ enrolling all mothers in a home visiting programme from birth, NZ First just placing an emphasis on parenting skills; while National has a policy of increasing specific programmes which target certain at risk families, Act seems to have a similar policy, and the policy of Christian Coalition is not clear. In the tertiary area, the philosophical positions of parties have a strong impact, with National retaining student fees while “working to minimise” them, Act requiring that tertiary students pay full (teaching) fees, and Christian Coalition only re-assessing the present tertiary funding, being not in favour of students having debt. In contrast, Alliance promises that tertiary education will be free, and both Labour and NZ First promise to set tertiary student allowances at the rate of the unemployment benefit.

Child Poverty Action is concerned that the key rights and responsibilities outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child are only very partially reflected in the policies of some of our political parties. It is our responsibility as voters to raise the profile of these issues in the political process.